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U. S. Department of Agriculture

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Monday, November 18, 1935

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "FRUIT CAKE NOTES." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics, United States Department of Agriculture.

--ooCoo--

The early bird gets many good things in this world. Right now I am thinking of the housekeeper who is an early bird about cake baking. She'll have the best fruit cake and plum pudding for the holidays. And that is why I'm being an early bird myself today and talking about making these special holiday cakes when the calendar tells me the date is only November 18.

"Do your Christmas baking early" is the motto for anyone who likes the best in fruit cake. For this kind of cake improves with age. You know that most of our familiar everyday cakes -- chocolate or sponge or layer or what not -- most of these are at their best in looks and taste and texture when they're fresh, that is, when they're not more than a day out of the oven. But not so with our traditional fruit cake. It needs some aging. Its various ingredients need to stand together for a few weeks at least to blend their flavors and give the whole cake that delicious mellow taste. Standing also gives a mellow texture because the moisture in the fruit has a softening effect.

Well, let's talk over fruit cake possibilities first. You have your choice of two kinds of fruit cake -- the dark and the white. If you plan to serve your cake for Thanksgiving, probably the white is your best choice since it takes less aging than the dark. White fruit cake keeps well in a tight container for several weeks. It is an especially good looking cake.

But if you are a believer in good old customs and traditions about food, you'll probably want dark fruit cake for Christmas. This dark, rich, spicy fruit mixture is much like old English plum pudding. And it keeps for months in a tight container.

A thin slice of fruit cake is the traditional accompaniment for such holiday beverages as egg nogg or fruit punch or mulled cider or grape juice. Many people like a tiny square of fruit cake with after-dinner coffee. Thin slices or tiny squares always. That's because fruit cake deserves to be treated as something rich and precious -- a luxury.

Good fruit cake is rich and precious, you know. You can't make it of poor ingredients. It requires good fruit, fresh nuts, fresh spices, well-flavored fat like butter, or sour cream, and so on. Fruit cake can be very expensive indeed. Or, you can make it of less expensive ingredients. But it's never a really cheap cake if it is worth making at all.



To give dark cake a fine fruit flavor, the cake-makers at the Bureau of Home Economics suggest using cider or grape juice for the liquid, and adding fruit jelly. Old-time cooks often used sherry or other fine wine.. Chopped raisins, currants, slivers of citron, chopped nuts -- these are the familiar ingredients of dark fruit cake. Walnuts and pecans are some of the best nuts to use. The spices people generally like best in fruit cake are cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice, and cloves. The sweetening is half sugar and half molasses. Some people like to use honey because honey helps keep the cake moist. A friend of mine in Vermont tells me she uses her own maple sirup in her Christmas cake. Well, take your choice of these ingredients for dark fruit cake.

As for white cake, this cake is made with egg whites but not yolks and with light-colored fruits and nuts such as candied pineapple, light sultana raisins, citron and blanched almonds or Brazil nuts. In white fruit cake, you use no spice nor molasses. Here again, the nicest fats to use are butter and sour cream. If you want a bit of color for contrast in white cake, add a few candied cherries.

About the leavening in the cake. Well, fruit cake is not supposed to be light and fluffy. But we do use a small amount of baking powder for the foundation-mixture and a bit of soda for the molasses and sour cream.

Well, so much for the mixing and the ingredients. Now about the baking. That's a most serious consideration. After you have put so much time and so many precious ingredients into that mixture, you naturally don't want to spoil the result by wrong cooking. And fruit cake isn't so easy to bake properly. Because it contains so much fruit and nuts, it is hard for the heat to penetrate and cook it evenly. The surface is likely to dry out or scorch while the center is still uncooked.

Different cooks have different ideas about solving this baking problem. But all agree on slow or moderate heat for the job. Some people steam the cake for a couple of hours and then finish it off by baking. But this is extra work. ~~My~~ friends at the Bureau of Home Economics say you don't have to resort to both steaming and baking if you have a good oven that will hold an even temperature and if you use a tube pan which lets the heat reach the center of the cake at the same time it does the edges. And they suggest a pan of water set in the oven with the cake to help prevent drying out. They favor a slow oven for dark fruit cake -- that is, an oven registering from 250 degrees to 275 degrees Fahrenheit. They say a dark cake that weighs from 5 to 6 pounds will take about 3 hours to bake at this temperature. A white fruit cake takes less time to bake. For it, a moderate oven is best -- about 300 degrees, and baking time is from 2 to 2 and one-half hours. You'll have less trouble with sticking if you line the pan with waxed or greased paper.

When cool, wrap fruit cake in waxed paper and store in a tight tin container.

Last year I told you about the Alabama women who were making a success of selling special Alabama fruit cake from a recipe worked out at the State College. I've had several requests for that recipe this year. Since we haven't time for it today, I'll put it on the schedule for tomorrow. Listen in first thing tomorrow for a good fruit cake recipe.

